

## **Elizabeth & Mary – Prophets**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Mary gets a great deal of attention with great moment in Luke, her prophetic declaration, a word of the Lord, the Magnificat. But I have tended to skim over Elizabeth's moment. Mary comes to see older Elizabeth, we presume to find perspective on this news from the angel Gabriel that she will bear a child who will change the world.

Look closely at this story and we see that Mary, the young teenager, brings a great gift to Elizabeth – Mary's presence. More to the point, the presence of the coming beloved of God that Mary is carrying sparks the **first in utero prophetic declaration**. **Embryonic John** leaps in the womb - God's Spirit is at work!

Only in Luke's version of the birth do we get this connected moment – two marginalized women, Elizabeth & Mary, Prophets. It is enfleshed, holiness incarnated. As one biblical scholar puts it:

...it is fleshy, embodied, earthy, ...a forerunner to the incarnation, which derives from the Latin root carn-("flesh"), which is also the root of the word "carnival."<sup>1</sup>

I think that our world needs more enfleshed faith.

Digging deeper into these powerful Gospels, embodying them, has been a gift of modern Bible scholars, particularly women.

Elizabeth is prompted by Mary's presence, their solidarity as this unwed teenager and woman of advanced age who must have felt the cultural expectations on her to conceive. Elizabeth then launches into her prophetic word. She twice declares Mary blessed, two different Greek words, with two distinct meanings. The second time Elizabeth says of Mary, blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The Greek for *blessed* that Luke uses is *makaria*, the same term that Jesus uses to bless people in the Beatitudes.

Remember the sermon of Jesus later in Luke?

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now,  
for you will be satisfied.<sup>3</sup>

Then the woes,

But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have already received your comfort.  
Woe to you who are well fed now,

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<sup>11</sup> "Homiletical Perspective". Charles Campbell . Feasting on the Word

<sup>2</sup> Verse 45. The Rev Dr. Judith Jones offers this insight in her commentary about Elizabeth's pronouncement of "blessing", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/>, Dec 20, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Luke chapter 6, verses 20, 21

for you will go hungry.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all the low expectations of an unwed pregnant teenager, her social status has been reversed. A great reversal indeed, and it is clear that Luke's Gospel is making a point right from the beginning, and with an exclamation mark! How astounding is this picture – two disempowered women connecting, even their babies connecting.

Those in the seats of power, Rome, the religious elite, no one of authority or status cares. But they should. Make no mistake, perhaps we still have injustices in the world. Tyrants still rise to power and the Elizabeths and Marys of our world today still struggle for justice.

Make no mistake, God's prophets were heard in ancient times and they are heard today. A quote attributed to the Dalai Lama is embedded in my memory:

If you think you are too small to make a difference,  
try sleeping with a mosquito

I can attest to how true that is. When I was in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, I had a roommate in my small bedroom – a mosquito. Every night it waited for me. Its base was on the tall ceiling, and when I was slipping into a glorious slumber it would descend upon me, buzzing. It got so bad that I covered every inch of my body with the blanket, yet that mosquito would find a single centimetre and torment me. It was relentless. I would be exhausted in the mornings, and dread going to sleep. I hunted that mosquito, actually talking to it, threatening it. I never did find it. Its presence held me captive.

Luke, in telling Elizabeth's and Mary's story, has the audacity to suggest that God's power, greater than any empire, works through the meek, the hungry, those who weep.

Who are those people in our world today? The prophets who are among us, who are NOT here but pushed by our systems to the margins? Our Advent challenge on this 3<sup>rd</sup> week, Christmas approaching, is to read the first chapter of Luke with fresh eyes. God welcomes the humble, the fleshy real us, you and me, with our heartfelt offerings...

Then, let us not linger there, but go out into the world living out the good news by caring for God's world.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid verses 24 & 25